

Title

The Missing Piece: Outreach to College/University Staff Members

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Abstract

Many academic library mission statements include the phrase, “students, faculty, and staff” when referencing the populations that they serve, but how active are we really at reaching out to non-library staff members at our colleges and universities? Libraries typically spend time and energy marketing to students and faculty, but the staff component of our missions can often be overlooked. During the 2012 school year, the Excelsior College librarians implemented three methods to increase staff awareness and use of the library’s resources and services. Through our Community Forum, on-site reference hours in the cafeteria, and virtual brown bags targeting specific staff groups, we are making inroads to actively engage staff members.

Keywords: Academic Libraries, Marketing, Distance Education, Universities & Colleges

Background

The Entrepreneurial Library Program, a department of the Sheridan Libraries at Johns Hopkins University, develops and provides financially sustainable services to clients outside of the Johns Hopkins libraries. Through a long-standing partnership, this department created and maintains an online library for Excelsior College. Though there is no physical campus, Excelsior College has offices for faculty, staff and administrators in Albany, NY. The librarians are located on the Johns Hopkins University campus in Baltimore, MD. Therefore, the librarians need to actively create opportunities to engage with staff members both in person through their quarterly visits to Albany and to maintain their relationships at a distance as well. Currently there are approximately 450 non-faculty staff members working at the College, which includes telecommuters. In addition, many of them are actively taking college courses for credit, either at Excelsior or at another institution.

The Excelsior College Library mission statement clearly states that we: “support the teaching, learning and research needs of Excelsior College students, faculty *and staff*. Through our collections, services and curriculum integration, the Library enriches the academic experience, empowers our users and emphasizes lifelong learning, meeting our users where they are – academically and geographically.”

Therefore, we need to ensure that all components of our mission are being addressed. Since “staff” is included, we actively need to incorporate marketing and outreach to staff members in our strategic plan goals and projects for each fiscal year.

Recent Literature/Discussion

A literature search in LITA and LISTA found many articles on the professional development of library personnel, but very few on outreach to non-library staff members at the college or

university level. Two articles published in 2007 were discovered that illustrated outreach strategies to medical staff and patients in hospital libraries (Lacy & Leslie) and (“Marketing Medical Staff”), but only one recent article was found that discussed marketing to university staff members. At the University of Texas-San Antonio, the libraries collaborated with the human resources training and development department to launch a library class for university professional and administrative staff (Arguello & Green, 2012). This literature search revealed that there is a current gap in the academic library literature about marketing to staff members.

We decided to address this issue and implemented three methods that have proven effective for our populations.

#1: Library Community Forum

Generate collaborative discussions. In June 2011, we organized and held an open forum at the College, which was branded the “Library Community Forum.” All faculty, staff and administrators at the College were invited and the librarians provided coffee and breakfast treats. It was an entire morning devoted to discussions about the library’s current offerings and future initiatives. In this arena, we shared our annual report, described new developments in the Library, and brainstormed ideas for the future with audience members. Since this is an online college, the Library Community Forum was held in person at the Albany offices where faculty, staff and administrators reside and it was also broadcast through a live webcast for off-site faculty and staff to attend as well.

There were polls included and librarian-initiated questions to the audience to generate discussion, including opportunities for breakout groups. To this end, it was imperative for the librarians to develop a presentation that allowed for flexibility and that was not too structured. We developed PowerPoint slides to share information but we also coached ourselves that it was OK if we strayed from the prepared slides to engage in impromptu discussions or to answer questions. The meeting was modeled in this way to encourage an open dialogue among staff and to increase awareness. In the past, the format for these types of sessions had been more traditional presentation or workshop-based where we would present and then leave time for Q&A at the end. With this new format, we had more opportunities to get input on future initiatives, encourage openness, and we also raised visibility of the online library. See, we do exist!

We could immediately tell that the Library Community Forum was successful because we had a lot of interactivity with staff and we left with many good ideas! The attendees were engaged and we learned that people generally like to talk. This past time we had about 25 attendees, which includes both virtual and in-person.

#2: On-site Reference Hours

Make the invisible visible. The librarians visit the Excelsior College offices quarterly to meet with faculty and staff in person. During our on-site visits, we often set up a table in the staff cafeteria where anyone can come and ask reference questions or just get to know more about the library. We chose the cafeteria because it is a high traffic area and we set up our table right inside the entrance. We recognize that this is not a new idea; many of our colleagues in academic libraries currently offer on-site departmental office hours, but for our purposes we intentionally chose a location that would be frequented mostly by staff members only. We had a poster printed with the librarian’s name and then three bullets that read: I can help you to find information on a topic, show you library resources and services, and take your new ideas or suggestions. We also bring candy to lure people over to the table (see attached image). Even if

they don't have a question, we still use that opportunity to market the library by telling them more about the resources and services that they may be interested in. Librarians at many different types of institutions may be able to identify similar places that are frequented mostly by staff.

Since we often work solely by phone or email, we've found that opportunities for face-to-face interactions are especially valuable as it personalizes services and puts a face to the mysterious, online librarians. When we meet staff members in person it fosters stronger relationships, making it more difficult for them to forget us. These lunch time, drop-in reference hours have been busier than expected, allowing us to meet and work one-on-one with many staff members conducting both personal and professional development research. I've even had lines of people waiting, which is one way that we can judge the success of this method. Another interesting finding is that I have held these hours twice now, and the second time I had many of the same visitors as the first time, but it was months later. I reminded them that they could email or call with questions anytime and did not have to wait for our visits, but I think they also enjoy the face to face interactions as much as we do.

#3: Targeted Virtual Brown Bags

Free marketing: Word of mouth. We host many webinars throughout the year, but this year we made outreach to student advisors a priority. The advisors at Excelsior College are on the front lines with our students and they play a critical role in student services. They provide guidance on academic policies and degree requirements, and they help students build their academic plans to achieve their career goals. The advisors are busy people, so we wanted to develop something that would be convenient for them to attend as well as something that would be informative to save them time in the long run. In addition, word of mouth is one of the best (and cheapest!) marketing tools, and since there are approximately 85 advisors at Excelsior College we figured word would spread quickly among staff members about the library's offerings.

We decided to hold virtual brown bags using Adobe Connect Pro and targeted advisors in each of the four schools at Excelsior: Business & Technology, Health Sciences, Liberal Arts and Nursing. The library liaison(s) responsible for each school held the brownbag. For example, the health sciences librarian held an informal meet and greet webinar with the health sciences advisors. Even though we were in multiple locations, we each brought our lunches and were able to share our screens and our ideas.

Through these informal, virtual conversations both parties were able to discuss how we can benefit each other. The librarians were able to market many resources and services, answer their questions regarding the library's information literacy course, and closed by encouraging them to refer students to the library with any research-related questions. We also pointed out resources that could be used for personal use and for professional development and we made sure to reiterate that the Library is a benefit for staff members as well. For example, we showed them how to listen to music in one of our streaming music databases, and how to brush up on current events before going to a holiday party, using CQ Researcher reports. It was nice to have this time to meet with them because when we went up for a visit in January, we were then able to put many faces with the names of the advisors that we had spoken with. I knew that the brown bags were a success because many of them even approached me and mentioned that they wished they had known about the library sooner and are using it more now. This worked for us at an online college, but librarians can even use this technique at a physical campus as well as an easy way to bring people together without leaving their desks. Meeting with advisors is just one idea and the possibilities are numerous for other groups that can be targeted.

Conclusion

Last year the Excelsior College librarians added three new methods to provide outreach to staff members to their repertoire: the Library Community Forum, on-site staff reference hours, and targeted virtual brown bags. All three methods have been pretty successful so far and we plan to continue with them. At the time of writing this article we recently hosted another Library Community Forum, and we will hold on-site reference hours in the cafeteria again at our next quarterly visit. For the virtual brown bags, we plan to target a different staff group next year, such as program directors, or admissions counselors. Many of the staff members that we have interacted with while implementing these new methods have been receptive and appreciative of the outreach.

The information in the present article was originally offered as a webinar at the ACRL Spring Virtual Institute (Castaldo, 2012) and there was some discussion in the chat area about different techniques that audience participants were currently using at their institutions to reach out to non-library staff members. In addition to the three methods presented in this article, some other ideas discussed included providing workshops for staff on topics such as Internet searching, using social media, finding images, business research, Excel, and Spanish/English computer literacy classes, holding leisure book clubs, and having ice cream socials that double as library orientations. What are you doing at your institution to reach out to non-library staff members? Perhaps there is a place at your institution that just staff or faculty frequent where you might want to set up “office hours”?

The moral: don’t let staff members at your institution fall by the wayside when there is a wealth of information and services available to them at the library. Whether staff are included in your library’s mission statement or not, take these ideas and run with them!



Open office hours in the staff cafeteria at Excelsior College.

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